

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Congresswoman Loretta Sanchez (CA-47), Co-Chair of the Congressional Caucus on Vietnam, and a bipartisan coalition of lawmakers today sent a letter to Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet urging him to release over one hundred political and religious prisoners in honor of “National Day,” a Vietnamese holiday celebrated each year on September 2. Vietnam’s government has said that 25,000 to 30,000 prisoners will be granted amnesty and released before National Day.

“If Vietnam wants to be taken seriously in the eyes of the international community, it must do more to improve its abysmal human rights record,” said Rep. Sanchez. “One of the ways President Triet could help repair his government’s reputation is by releasing non-violent political and religious prisoners from prison. These individuals have done nothing except exercise their basic political and civil liberties.”

A bipartisan coalition of U.S. Representatives signed on to Rep. Sanchez’s letter, including Rep. Zoe Lofgren (D - CA), Rep. Anh "Joseph" Cao (R - LA), and Rep. Gerald Connolly (D - VA). A full copy of the letter can be found below:

Dear President Triet,

We are writing to urge Vietnam to release all prisoners of conscience. We are aware that the Ministry of Public Security has stated that between 25,000 to 30,000 prisoners will be granted amnesty and released from prison before your country’s September 2nd National Day.

We remain concerned that the Government of Vietnam continues to silence dissent, and we call on Vietnamese authorities to end the harassment, arrest and imprisonment of peaceful dissenters. Just two weeks ago, human rights defender Professor Pham Minh Hoang, who is a lecturer at the Ho Chi Minh City Polytechnic Institute, was arbitrarily detained for expressing his concerns about social justice and corruption. Under the International Covenants on Human Rights and according to Vietnamese law, political expression is a basic freedom and not a crime. As citizens of the world, Vietnamese citizens are entitled to the freedom of religion, opinion, speech, and the right to counsel and a fair trial.

We are aware that many of the prisoners who have been incarcerated were charged and sentenced after unfair trials and being denied their right to counsel. The prisoners currently being held are forced to perform hard labor and at times denied medical attention. Vietnamese authorities have charged the prisoners of conscience under Article 88 for conducting propaganda against the Socialist Republic of Vietnam or Article 79 for carrying out activities aimed at overthrowing the people's administration which are both part of the 1999 Penal Code. President Triet, we urge the Government of Vietnam to repeal or amend provisions in the 1999 Penal Code that criminalize peaceful dissent and ensure that legislation fully protects the rights to freedom of expression, association and opinion.

We are including a list of individuals detained in Vietnam for the peaceful expression of political or religious views. Although, we have included more than one hundred individuals on this list, it by no means includes all prisoners who are currently being detained. The lack of inclusion on the attached list should not preclude prisoners from being released. We urge you to release all prisoners without any conditions or restrictions. We believe that the freedoms of expression, access to information, and political participation are universal rights. They should be available to all people, including ethnic and religious minorities.

Laws like the 1999 Penal Code and the continued harassment and imprisonment of individuals who exercise their freedom will continue to be an obstacle to the U.S.-Vietnamese relationship. Reiterating President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton commitment to enforcing human rights standards, we urge Vietnam to become a responsible member of the international community and ensure the full protection of human rights.